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ABSTRACT

There is an increasing interest by government in accountability for higher education. Efforts such as performance budgeting, performance auditing, and state review of academic programs are becoming more common. Opponents of government involvement assert that regional accreditation reviews are sufficient to maintain quality standards. However, critics of the current accreditation process contend that it is an ingrown process in which denial of accreditation is virtually impossible. Some observers feel that the best way to guard against an increased state role in higher education is for the institutions themselves to strengthen their own evaluation activities. Self-evaluations should be comprehensive, include broad participation, and be designed to enhance program quality. Both quantitative and qualitative data should be included. The findings should be submitted to an external consultant for review. Conclusions should be made public so that the community can see that the institution is concerned about quality, that its efforts are worthy of public funding, and that state evaluators are unnecessary. This document includes a 17-item bibliography and an order form for related research reports available from the Association for Study of Higher Education including the full report upon which this summary is based. (DC)

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FYI

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The Path to Excellence: Quality Assurance in Higher Education

by Lawrence R. Marcus, Anita O. Leone, and Edward D. Goldberg
New Jersey Department of Higher Education

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As growth in public revenues has become increasingly difficult to secure, the interest of legislators and those in executive agencies of government regarding the accountability of tax-supported appropriations has broadened. The necessity for proof that public funds are being expended in a cost-effective manner, to a good end, and with a demonstrable benefit to those being served escaped higher education for many years; that appears no longer to be the case. But for government to ask such questions of colleges and universities departs from a centuries-old tradition that has kept government at arm's length from the academic activity of our institutions of higher learning. Historically the relationship, particularly after the Dartmouth College case, was laissez-faire.

Beginning with the normal schools of the early nineteenth century and then with the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862, public funds found their way to support a sphere of activity that to that time had been private in finance and usually sectarian in clientele. Federal spending programs for higher education usually paralleled a perceived compelling national interest: industrializing America, avoiding or reducing discontent among veterans home from war, meeting the challenge of the Russians, and achieving the American dream of equality. By the late 1970s, all colleges and universities in America were receiving between one-eighth and one-sixth of their budgets from the federal government (Edwards 1980, p. 75); in fact, the independent sector has become so reliant on the public coffers that many observers wonder whether the truly private college has disappeared.

What is the Trend for Government Regulations?

Regulation is not usually far behind public money. Thus, it is no wonder that state and federal government regulators, having expanded their activity in many areas over the last three to four decades, have finally reached higher education's core. Until recently, the oversight function was limited to institutional licensure and to state-level planning and coordination, including the approval of new degree programs. Now, such efforts as performance budgeting (Peterson et al. 1977, p. 34), performance auditing (Berdahl 1977, p. 36), and state review of existing academic programs (Barak and Berdahl 1978, p. 55; Bogue 1980, p. 71) are becoming more common. Even more indicative of greater involvement of government is the fact that at least 17 states have provided their higher education agency with the responsibility and general powers to accredit institutions and programs within their jurisdiction (Harcleroad 1980a, p. 1).

What role does accreditation play?

Government activity in academic matters is not without controversy. Increased quality review activity by the states is supported by such diverse groups as the Education Commission of the States (1979, pp. 4–5) and the Sloan Commission on Government and Higher Education (Kaysen et al. 1980, p. 23). However, the opposition is equally impressive. Joining college and university leaders are those from the accreditation establishment who contend that the historical use of the regional associations and disciplinary and professional groups as guarantors of educational quality should be maintained. As is noted by Trivett (1976, p. 7), the federal government has relied on accreditation as the basis for eligibility for federal funds, and the states have relied on it as evidence of quality for the maintenance of a license to operate as well as for continued eligibility for state funds. Many would have it remain that way.

Accreditation as an indicator of quality has come under strong criticism, in part since accrediting bodies do not generally attempt to define educational quality but, instead, seek to assess an institution's quality according to the institution's own mission and self-definition (Troutt 1981, p. 48). Thus, an institution with limited vision would be assessed according to how well it accomplishes its goals. The institution discusses its progress toward meeting its goal through a self-study. According to Semrow (1977, p. 4), however, it is the exceptional self-study that is truly evaluative. Other criticisms, including Hollander's (1981, p. 5), contend that, since regional accreditation teams are composed of persons from other institutions in the region, the process becomes ingrown and the denial of accreditation is virtually impossible. Others cite as problems the lengthy (often 10-year) period of accreditation granted to institutions and the secrecy surrounding the report of the review team. Further, proponents of greater government involvement point out that accrediting associations do not monitor or enforce standards once accreditation is bestowed, nor are they willing to make public those standards that an institution does not meet (Trivett 1976, p. 59).

Whether accreditation continues to serve as the basis for eligibility for public funds remains to be seen. As has been mentioned, some states already have become more activist in attempting to ascertain that institutions are, indeed, providing a quality education. Some observers, including Donald K. Smith (1980, p. 57), believe that the greatest safeguard against an increased state role is for the institutions themselves to strengthen their own evaluation activities.

How can institutions assure quality control?

Assessment of the quality of educational programs is no easy matter since, as Scott (1981) observes, "quality has proven to be an elusive concept." Nevertheless, a comprehensive, systematic appraisal effort can assist the faculty and the institution's leadership in making judgments regarding the strength of its academic offerings. Implicit, then, is an evaluation approach with a formative orientation intended to enhance program quality. To do so requires a focus both on the program's process (the manner in which it operates) and outcome (the actual effects of the program).

Just as the evaluation needs to be comprehensive, so, too, should there be broad participation in the process. Chaired by a person of recognized stature, a review committee should include both senior and junior program faculty, academic administrators, and faculty from other departments. A subcommittee of program faculty should prepare a self-study that should serve as the foundation for the program review.

At a minimum, the self-study should include a discussion of the following: the goals of the program (within the context of the broader institutional mission); the program's organization including internal processes and personnel practices; available fiscal resources and facilities including laboratories, and library holdings; the curriculum including course sequencing, comparison to professional standards, and relevance to student goals; the faculty including demographic data, workload requirements, specializations, and scholarly activity; the students including entry and exit characteristics, class sizes, graduation rates, and placement; and current issues before the program including perceived weaknesses and future plans.

Included in the self-study should be appropriate quantitative data: number of graduates, attrition rates, enrollments, student demand trends, volumes in the library, faculty publications, test scores, success of graduates, course costs, and cost-effectiveness data. But, it must be understood that quantitative data alone do not tell the entire story and may even be counterproductive to quality, since as Becker (1972, p. 6) points out, an overreliance on numerical factors, such as average cost per credit hour or per graduate, encourages faculty turnover and discourages rewards for scholarship in an effort to keep costs down.

Thus, it is imperative that the assessment of program goals, student learning, faculty performance, and curriculum have a qualitative bent. For example, according to Miller (1979, pp. 92–94), an examination of faculty quality should move beyond background characteristics and workload statistics to a focus on the quality of teaching, ability to retain students, stability of the faculty, professional activities of the faculty, faculty activity in research and publication, and the vitality of the department including its interest in innovation and ability to be self-critical.

Is outside guidance useful?

Once completed, the self-study should be submitted to an impartial, external consultant selected for his/her professional standing and knowledgeable about the issues and trends in the particular field of study. This person should be asked to review the self-study, to pose a series of follow-up questions to the faculty, and then to visit the campus to discuss the issues with program and other faculty, students, and administrators. The result of this activity should be a cogent report that comments not only on whether the program is accomplishing its stated goals but also the extent to which those goals make sense given the institution, its students, and the trends in the field of study. Most important is the consultant's judgment regarding the candor of the self-study, the program's ability to be self-critical, and its willingness to act upon identified weaknesses. The consultant's report should be used by the institution's leadership as the basis for decisions regarding the program's future.

Institutions would be wise to circulate broadly the consultant's report or a candid summary of it. The University of Chicago's approach of including the reports of external consultants in an official university publication is a model worth repeating (Miller, 1979, p. 272). As Howard Bowen (1980, p. 37) has commented, institutions really don't want to reveal their own problems, but unless the entire college community is made aware of them, efforts toward improvement can only be limited, and unless the broader community is informed, accountability can only be limited.

Thus, comprehensive, forthright, decision-oriented program evaluations, made public, are the best way for an institution to demonstrate that it is concerned about quality, that its efforts are worthy of continued public funding, and that it does not need the on-campus presence of state evaluators in order to be accountable and responsive to public concerns. To do less would be to invite more regulation and greater state involvement in assessing academic and other education outcomes.

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